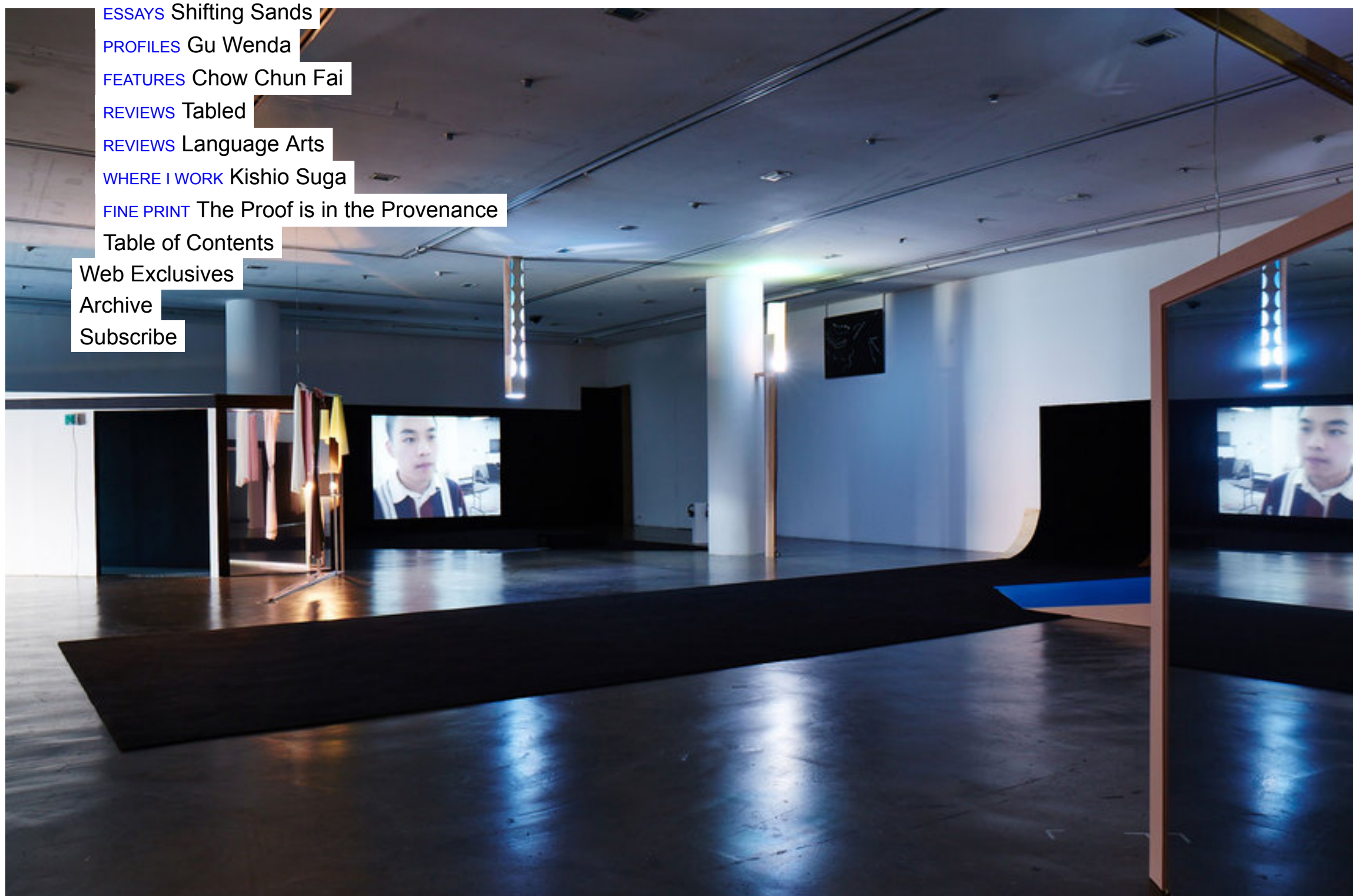




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SUNG HWAN KIM, *A-DA-DA*, 2002, video: 20 min. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Artsonje Center, Seoul.

LIFE OF ALWAYS A MIRROR SUNG HWAN KIM

WEB EXCLUSIVE BY JOO HAN

ARTSONJE CENTER

KOREA, SOUTH

“Life of Always a Mirror,” comprising of three video works as well as installations and a performance, was the largest solo exhibition of New York-based artist Sung Hwan Kim to be held in South Korea. In the ever unpredictable, witty and multi-sensory theatre created by the artist, the exhibition addressed the notion of multiplied, fragmented identities through Kim’s representations of the individual and collective past.

For this exhibition Kim redefined the second floor of Seoul’s Artsonje Center by unevenly dividing the space with narrow passages and oblique standing walls and objects. On the left corner was his earliest work in the show, *A-DA-DA* (2002). The 20-minute video, whose title is a Korean onomatopoeia for babbling or stuttering, is a second-generation immigrant’s various attempts at articulating his life story. In the beginning of this loosely sequential video, Kim stages two Korean-American actors in a typical scene of an argument between an authoritarian Asian patriarch and his dissenting son. Soon enough, however, the artist derides this narrative by introducing distortions; Kim himself intrudes to randomly smash a wooden stick to provoke the actors, or has them fulfill comical tasks while reading their lines. Kim, thus, has created a film that “stutters” its narrative instead of delivering it, a seeming reflection of his deliberate hesitance and skepticism in portraying a stereotypical father-son/generation-gap story.

The following sequence of *A-DA-DA* features Kim’s brilliant use of camera. Through narration, the “son” discusses the indelible imprint of his father in his experience of being forced to use ruled notebooks. It is through constant vertical and horizontal panning across a ruled sheet of paper—which the protagonist keeps on folding, as conditioned by his father—that Kim visually unravels this portion of the son’s memory. Kim playfully projects messages on the paper to visualize, by means of alternating between vertical and horizontal procession, (a)symmetry and (in)coherence between the former and the latter. As such, this overwhelming presentation of camera movement,

narrations and selective English subtitles call to the viewer's mind (in varying degrees of comprehensibility for the Korean-speaking audience) issues of filial piety, immigration and heritage, as well as hints of the Freudian slip and Oedipus complex.



SUNG HWAN KIM, *Manahatas Dance*, 2009, video: 16 min. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London.

In exploring the exhibition further, into dispersed planes of light, mirrors and curtains, the viewers encountered the second work, *Manahatas Dance* (2009). Inspired by Manhattan's Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, and a line from United States President Barack Obama's inauguration speech, "We will harness the sun, and the winds and the soil, to fuel our cars and run our factories," this video is Kim's exploration of the history of New York, the city in which he is currently based. The video portrays stories rooted in Manhattan's society, political discourse and economic development, layered with elements of 16th-century occult practice. In Kim's vision these stories of Manhattan are weaved together with scenes of agitating chants and percussive sessions enacted by young American performers.

Works displayed on the third floor fast-forwarded viewers to a later period in Kim's career, where they encountered his recent video piece, *Temper Clay* (2012). First commissioned by London's Tate Modern as part of its "The Tanks at Tate Modern" (2012) exhibition, the work was set up on its own at Artsonje, in a black-box theatre with relatively scarce accompaniments, and offered a distinct, third element to the show. The 24-minute video revolves around two disparate episodes from the artist's memory: the Apgujeong Hyundai Apartment, his childhood home in Seoul; and a lakeside vacation house. Amidst characters performing perplexing processions and choreography, which the artist sees as a "musical," viewers are shown Kim's curious attempt at re-appreciating the everyday moments that he was too young to perceive at the time. Scenes of children running around inside the apartment, while their maid meekly cleans up their mess, is an amusing probe into the initial stages of Korea's now-flourishing Gangnam district during the 1970s.

"Life of Always a Mirror" was a wordplay on a Korean primary-school textbook on arts, music and physical education, entitled *Life of Always Fun*. In all of his witty and bewildering videos that were in the exhibition, the underlying concept that Sung Hwan Kim has in mind is similar to that of a child playing in front of a mirror. What he captures in his works is the interaction between the self and its inverted representation—whether that "self" is an individual like the Korean-American son of *A-DA-DA*, or a collective entity like the city of New York or Seoul—and his videos playfully explore the slippages and shifts found in the intricate relationship between the two identities.



SUNG HWAN KIM, *Temper Clay*, 2012, video: 24 min. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London.

Sung Hwan Kim's "Life of Always a Mirror" was on view at Artsonje Center, Seoul from August 30 to November 30, 2014.

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